

Making the Front Desk Matter

The Graduate School

University of South Carolina

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Introduction

We walk by them all the time. They are usually the first contact your customers have with your organization. Hopefully, there is in fact a person sitting there, rather than a bell, or even worse, a blender as seen in one television commercial. If most offices want good customer service, then why doesn't the front desk get any love? How come it is often only noticed when the phone is ringing off the hook and no one is there? It's time to treat the front desk right and determine how we can utilize it to help us provide outstanding customer service.

The Graduate School at The University of South Carolina is a service unit whose responsibilities include admission of prospective students, degree clearance for current students, curriculum compliance for all programs of study, ombuds function, travel grant awards administration, and the Presidential Fellows. We are led by the Dean of Graduate Studies and a Senior Associate Dean who is responsible for the daily operations as well as oversight of everything in The Graduate School. The Associate Dean handles curriculum and compliance issues. Our Assistant Dean serves as Ombudsman for graduate students and works with international programs.

Half of The Graduate School's twenty-person staff is in the Enrollment Management area, and are responsible for processing applications (from CollegeNET), and performing degree audits on students' program of study so they can graduate. We also have two Information Technology staff members who work closely with the Enrollment Management area, maintain the Graduate Management System, update the web page, coordinate with CollegeNET and keep the rest of the IT systems running smoothly. The Assistant Director of Graduate Admissions, Executive Administrative Coordinator, Public Information Director, Assistant Director of Recruitment, Data and Special Events, Office Manager and Business Manager round out our staff.

Calendar Year 2012 was a transformative year for The Graduate School as new leadership was implemented and 40% of our employees are new. Up until July 2012, the front desk was staffed by a temporary receptionist. Due to budget constraints and a reallocation of human resources, it is now staffed by Graduate Assistants (GAs) and supervised by the Office Manager, who reports to the Business Manager.

As a result of the changes in leadership, it was imperative that The Graduate School create a strategic plan to help guide us for the next three years. One of the goals is to evaluate the role of the front desk, how we can utilize it to provide good customer service both internally and externally, and how we can staff it in a cost effective manner without sacrificing its efficiency or usefulness.

There are several key areas that we want to ensure receive thorough attention:

- Customer service
- Workflow efficiency
- Responsibility

A renewed focus on customer service is imperative at The Graduate School. We want to provide accurate and timely responses and when there are occasions for us to say “no”, do it politely and with sufficient explanation. Since there are more than 240 graduate programs and over 6,000 graduate students, ensuring workflow efficiency is vital to the success of The Graduate School.

Areas of Focus: Functions, Mail, Funding, Coverage, Technical Knowledge & Banner

The front desk functions include answering the phone, helping walk-in customers, processing mail, document research, document tracking and responding to/rerouting emails received in the GradApp mailbox. In an effort to provide timely customer service, whoever sits at the front desk needs to be knowledgeable of The Graduate School's admissions and graduation procedures, the Graduate Management System and CollegeNET . Additionally, they should be familiar with other areas of the University that affect graduate students including payment of fees and class registration.

One of the main goals of the front desk is to handle as much of the traffic (phone and walk in) as possible without having to go to another person in the office. By having the front desk covered by well-trained and knowledgeable people, the customers receive efficient and accurate responses and the rest of the employees are not interrupted as often as they would be with less trained front desk staff.

Two batches of internal and external mail are received daily and are opened, date-stamped and routed through the front desk. In some cases, this involves researching in the Graduate Management System to match up the incoming documents with the corresponding Program Coordinator in our office. The GradApp mailbox is a general email box that is listed on The Graduate School's web site. Whoever is staffing the front desk responds to the emails or routes them appropriately.

Due to numerous changes in leadership and the location of The Graduate School within the University organizational structure over the last several years, it was important to develop a realistic budget, reflective of current and future needs. One of the areas where we felt we could

redeploy some human resources and reduce costs was through the transition from a full-time temporary employee to the use of Graduate Assistants to staff the front desk.

The transition to Graduate Assistants as the primary source of front-desk coverage led to the need for detailed scheduling, additional training and more readily available backup support. Due to the fluctuating class schedules of the Graduate Assistants, careful coordination is necessary and secondary and tertiary backups have to be determined.

The Office Manager who supervises the front desk has other duties unrelated to the Enrollment Area and in fact is not a part of that department, which potentially leads to a disconnect when processes and procedures change. Also, changes are made to the systems handled by our Director for Strategic Technical Initiatives, which makes him better suited to train staff, including GAs, on those systems.

See Appendix 1

The Admissions piece of the new Banner program was implemented in Fall 2012 and has had a significant impact on the need for document tracking, scanning and indexing. Graduate Assistants are perfect to handle these tasks, which led to a trial plan: Scan-on-Demand.

Problem Statement

Is the front desk staffed properly, operating smoothly and located organizationally in the right place?

Data Collection

We collected data in hopes of documenting the main topics our office deals with on a regular basis. Spikes in certain areas at different times of the year should be noticeable. We also wanted to see if there were any trends that needed additional attention. Data was collected from early September 2012 through late November 2012. In order to take seasonal differences into consideration, we will need data for an entire year.

I created a Check Sheet in Excel for the staff at the front desk to use to collect data. We have numerous people staffing the front desk; therefore I wanted to make it as user friendly as possible. Since there wasn't any data, we started collecting data in early September in broad categories: Admission, Graduation, Bursar, Registrar and Other Department. We also tracked staff members requested to see if there were any trends, for example if most of the calls or walk-ins were redirected to one person. There is a separate sheet for each day with columns of blanks and rows for different topics and names.

See Appendix 2

A questionnaire was sent to all staff members asking for their input on how they thought the front desk should operate, how scanning and indexing should get done, and how they thought the Graduate Assistants would be used most effectively. I also met with the four Graduate Assistants who staff the front desk to gain some insight from them on what works well and what needs to be revamped.

See Appendix 3

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data shows a couple of trends. There were more phone calls about admission than the other main topics. Questions about graduation had the most walk-ins, with admission-related issues coming in second. Combining phone call and walk-ins by topic, admission was number one, with questions needing to be redirected to other departments coming in second, and graduation-related issues coming in third.

See Appendix 4

It makes sense for there to be a significant number of calls that need to go to other departments since some people may not know who to call, so they contact The Graduate School as a first option. For this reason it is helpful to have people staffing the front desk who are knowledgeable about other parts of the University. This helps validate our decision to utilize Graduate Assistants at the front desk instead of a temporary employee who isn't familiar with USC.

Academic departments throughout the University have assigned coordinators in our office which cut down on the volume of calls routing through the front desk. Web access for staff members' phone numbers allows people to call staff members directly, thereby "avoiding" the front desk altogether. Email addresses are also available on-line and provide customers the opportunity to contact specific staff members. Thankfully, this saves people time and cuts down on traffic at the front desk.

The feedback from the staff was helpful in identifying some specific parts of processing the incoming documents that needed to be augmented. For example, if the staff member at the front desk makes specific notations on documents to alert the receiver of steps already taken, then

duplicative steps are avoided. One suggestion we are able to implement is to use a schedule for scanning and indexing in addition to a schedule for front-desk coverage. The key piece of feedback from the GAs was that they would like to know which staff member is available to take a call or meet with a customer so they could provide efficient and effective customer service. We will have to continue to focus on this issue and develop a protocol to more effectively serve our customers.

The peak season for admissions is mid-November through mid-March. One of the scheduling issues we noticed involves a gap in coverage by the Graduate Assistants from mid-December through mid-January due to the academic calendar. Not having Graduate Assistants during that time coupled with the December holiday break and the busiest time of year for admissions created a backlog of mail that needed to be processed, scanned and indexed. In the future we may need to bring in some temporary help during the winter to fill in gaps in our coverage.

Options

1. Continue to staff the front desk with Graduate Assistants, with backup support from the Executive Administrative Coordinator, but move the supervisory responsibility to the Associate Dean, who is over the Assistant Director for Enrollment Management.
2. Continue to staff the front desk with Graduate Assistants, with backup support from the Executive Administrative Coordinator and Program Coordinators, but move the supervisory responsibility to the Assistant Director for Enrollment Management, who supervises the Enrollment Management area.

3. Continue to staff the front desk with Graduate Assistants, with backup support from the Executive Administrative Coordinator and supervision of the front desk by the Office Manager. The Graduate Assistants are supervised and trained on Admissions area functions (scanning, indexing, document tracking, etc.) by the Director for Strategic Technical Initiatives.
4. Hire a full-time temporary employee to staff the front desk to free up Graduate Assistants to help in other areas of the office.

Implementation Plan

1. Master schedule and new supervision of Graduate Assistants

The Director for Strategic Technical Initiatives will supervise the GAs since he can handle all of their technical questions related to systems, scanning, indexing and document tracking. The Office Manager will be responsible for ensuring that the front desk is staffed during business hours. We will have a master schedule for coverage of the front desk and admissions area. If someone cannot cover their specified time, then they are responsible for swapping with someone else. The master schedule replaces the Scan-on-Demand plan which will help ensure an equitable and predictable use of our Graduate Assistant resources.

The Director for Strategic Technical Initiatives, in consultation with other managers, has arranged a schedule; it has been communicated to all the staff and is currently in use.

One potential obstacle is if GAs don't show up. We will overcome that potential obstacle by using other available GAs or staff as necessary. We won't incur additional costs since

we aren't adding new staff. The benefits include more productivity from GAs, less confusion about role responsibility and better customer service.

2. Maintain a current and user-friendly handbook for the front desk.

The Executive Administrative Coordinator has updated and will keep current the handbook. Obstacles to overcome include obtaining information for the handbook that isn't readily available which she will need to gather from necessary co-workers.

Whenever the handbook is updated she will alert the staff, including the GAs, by email.

It will become a part of standard operating procedure by reviewing it with new hires, and notifying staff of any changes with a confirmation email reply that they understand the changes.

Evaluation Method

The new master schedule will be evaluated on a monthly basis by asking GAs and staff for their input including positives, negatives and possible improvements. The master schedule will be tweaked as necessary due to changes in work/class schedules of the GAs and changes in peak volume in the Enrollment Area.

We will begin to track how much time is spent scanning and indexing. By doing so, we will be able to plan more effectively for the busy admissions season next winter. We will also start to track the number of emails received by the general GradApp email box and how much time each week staff spend responding to them so we can ensure appropriate staff are deployed to handle that workload.

Summary and Recommendations

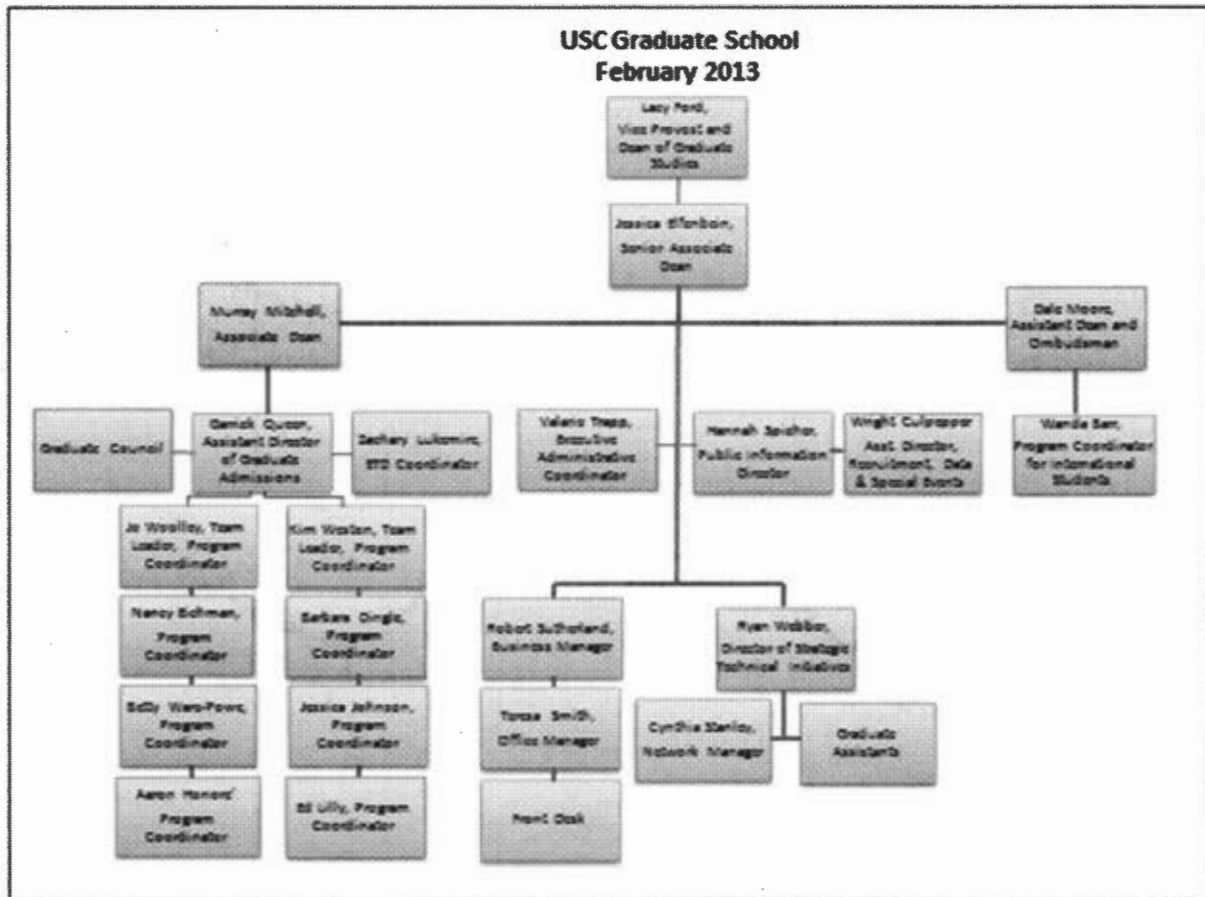
While we have made good progress studying, analyzing, and discussing the operations of the front desk in the past six months, it is imperative that we continue to pay close attention to it and seek opportunities for improvement in the future. As we begin to follow a detailed schedule for front desk and admissions coverage during Spring 2013, we should pursue feedback from the Graduate Assistants and the staff. We also need to establish some baseline data for scanning and indexing so we can plan ahead for next year.

We feel confident that by having a detailed, master schedule for coverage of the front desk and admissions that we will make even better use of our Graduate Assistants. By having the Director for Strategic Technical Initiatives supervise the GAs, they will get detailed training on the technical processes in the Enrollment Management area, which will lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness.

Like most organizations, we already knew the front desk was a key factor in our ability to provide outstanding customer service. Thanks to the analyses and ensuing discussion during this project, we realized that we had opportunities for improvement and we look forward to successfully implementing those changes.

Appendix 1

USC Graduate School Organizational Chart



Appendix 2

USC Graduate School

Front Desk Data Collection Sheet

Monday

9/10/2012

Phone Calls

Walk-ins

Staff										Total	Staff									Total
Name	1	1	1	1						4	Name									0
Name										0	Name									0
Name										0	Name									0
Name										0	Name									0
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Name										0	Name									0
Name										0	Name									0
Name										0	Name									0
Name										0	Name									0
Total Staff										4										0

Phone Calls

Walk-ins

Topic										Total	Topic									Total
Admission	1	1	1							3	Admission									0
Graduation										0	Graduation									0
Bursar										0	Bursar									0
Registrar										0	Registrar									0
Other Dept										0	Other Dept									0
Total Topic										3										0
Total										7										0

Appendix 3

USC Graduate School

Front Desk, Scanning/Indexing & Graduate Assistants

In your ideal world, how would:

1. The front desk operate?
2. Scanning and indexing get done?
3. Graduate Assistants be used most effectively?

Appendix 4

<u>Data Summary</u>							
Phone calls			Phone calls + Walk-ins				
Topic	Total	%	Topic	Phone	Walk	Total	%
Admission	385	72%	Admission	385	36	421	65%
Graduation	32	6%	Graduation	32	44	76	12%
Bursar	12	2%	Bursar	12	2	14	2%
Registrar	16	3%	Registrar	16	4	20	3%
Other Dept	93	17%	Other Dept	93	23	116	18%
Total Topic	538	100%	Total Topic	538	109	647	100%
Walk-ins							
Topic	Total	%					
Admission	36	33%					
Graduation	44	40%					
Bursar	2	2%					
Registrar	4	4%					
Other Dept	23	21%					
Total Topic	109	100%					